

Freedom of Unfinishedness

Figurative art itself is like a corpse or mummy, and one wants to resuscitate this forbidden thing, bring it back to life.' —Mike Kelley

Mark Grotjahn's Mask sculptures—cardboard boxes cast in bronze then given crude facial features before painting—resuscitate the figure by pressing definitions of figuration into enthralling new arenas. Their fascination lies in their transgressions, in the way they undulate between abstraction and figuration. Familiarity uncannily arises from welcoming foreignness and hybridity, and in this, the viewer realizes that we are all one.

Grotjahn's boundary crossings in these painted sculptures elegantly acknowledge how lines between figuration and abstraction have been sharpened, blurred, retooled, broken, and re-mapped again throughout the history of Modernism, as Bob Nickas points out in *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, a survey Grotjahn is featured in. Regarding Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Nickas reminds the reader that:

...these works of Malevich's also assert that a black square and a red square are just as "real" as a representational picture, to which we would have to add: the shared reality of all painted pictures—and this would include, for example, a sunset, a nude, a tree, flowers and a vase, the woods at night—is that all painted pictures are abstractions of one sort or another. Moreover, every painted picture—is representational because every painting is ultimately a representation of space.?

Experiencing painting as simultaneously abstract and representational (including figuration) is not only liberating in and of itself; it also repairs art critical seams between formalism and conceptualism. As Grotjahn said in our recent studio visit,, he pushes right past that dichotomy:

Formalists were really deep thinkers, highly conceptual. Even if the theories were disagreeable, like tapping into a universal language and trying to depict that in a painting, that's still a conceptual process, an idea.

The question of how an artist can breathe life into what Kelley calls a forbidden thing (a monstrous inanimate object) feels intrinsic to Grotjahn's art historical restorations, which deal mostly in tracking the passage of time: how history and memory are generated. Vivification in artwork—

—its expressive success, somewhat dependent upon the viewer feeling that an artwork's materials are alive whether or not it presents recognizable imagery—often deals

in the unpacking of time, through mimicry of what novelist Milan Kundera calls a "presentness":

Narration is recollection, therefore a summary, a simplification, an abstraction. The true face of life, of the prose of life, is found only in the present moment. But how to recount past events and give them back the presentness they've lost?*

Grotjahn's continual deconstruction of caricature and persona in objecthood alchemically captures this "presentness" in these Mask sculptures, through liquid gesture (paint) imprinted upon fixed material (bronze). But this invocation of lucid and immediate presence inextricably linked to past experience has long been a goal in his past bodies of work. Whether making his Butterflies, Faces, or Masks, Grotjahn is known for playing up modes of personification through language usage (via titling or using his signature compositionally) and through imaging recognizable, albeit often obscured bodily elements wedged into a stratum of highly abstract gestural marks. For example, he calls his sculpture groups "families"; each piece within a sculpture family is a "unique variant." His depiction of leaf or seed-like eyes in his Circus paintings and other Face paintings obviously tribute Picasso, but more subtly suggest how eyes are windows. In this, layers of personae, age, archetype, and memory are revealed, hinted at conceptually through language and formally through obsessive use of Prismacolor pencils or oil paint in the Butterflies, which bisect vertical lines to radiate bold sunbeams of vibrant, saturated chroma; impasto paint application with palette knives to make the Faces paintings on cardboard or linen often resemble fiercely contorted weather systems, blizzards and hurricanes with calm, alert eyes in their storms; and finger-painting directly onto bronze in the Mask sculptures displayed in this catalog. In any of these works, viewed up close one quickly notices that evident inclusion of past mark-making decisions-whether sourced in mistakes or confidently "correct" gestures-are apparently sealed in the current surface state, solidified elegantly like Victorian cave graffiti: those territorial graphite marks encased in layers of translucent limestone deposits that hard-slip over growing stalagmite formations. Grotjahn's marks are similarly geological; part of the joy in looking at his work is perusing the surface for enshrouded hints of color, line, and shape.

To experience Grotjahn's artwork is to both fix and traverse time, by witnessing how residual traces of his procedure and process act as lodgings, rich sites of security that allow the psychological and physical grounding needed to continue questing through the artist's own history in relationship to his sociopolitical context. Again, Milan Kundera notes how history, in relationship to creative practice, does not correlate to typical notions of progress:

Applied to art, the notion of history has nothing to do with progress; it does not imply improvement, amelioration, an ascent; it resembles a journey undertaken to explore unknown lands and to chart them.⁵

These painted sculptures, especially, freeze a multitude of references into their surfaces,

but they are not mere imitations of other painters. When Grotjahn makes these sculptures, he does not predict or direct their outcome: that would reduce them to illustrations. The art historical references by title relate to dwelling in aesthetics Grotjahn admires, taking up dialogue with ancestral artists, and seeing how his recollection of a certain creator's picture may imbricate his appreciation. Honoring inheritance with masks, embodied as talismans, also sets his new body of work in ancient lineage. In this overt historical referencing, art history is transformed into camaraderie: a fluid, unceasing recollected alliance. Recollected, because Grotjahn favors memories of canonical artworks in lieu of direct research, to evoke sensibility beyond literal emulation.

For example, *Untitled (Race Track Scribble, Jackson Mask M41d)* (2015) does much more than include Pollock-like drips. Moving around it, after noting its spooked facial expression due to circles drawn around its eyes and saggy O-shaped mouth hole, one sees a snowstorm of white dots and lines that look as if bark beetles carved their feasting trails into a tree trunk. Handprints harken back to petroglyphs and childhood, and there's a splotchy, swarthy grime inherent to the backside, celebrated by *décollage* Pop artists like Mimmo Rotella, Jacques Villeglé, and more recently by Mark Bradford. In its free-associative referencing, this sculpture as well as the others conjure atemporality® instead of linear time progression, which Grotjahn doubts is possible in studio practice:

[Discovery in artmaking] is not manifest destiny...Time is constantly branching off. Other things are happening in different places, the language is very sophisticated. I'm pulling from all different times without that being the idea. The idea is to make something really good.

Ironically, while Grotjahn is known for working serially, he is an artist who is adamant about not repeating himself. *Untitled (Blue Van Gogh Cypress, Mask M38.c)* (2015) and *Untitled (Blue Pink Van Gogh Cypress, Mask M38.d)* (2015), for example, share cast forms but their distinct color palettes render them fraternal, rather than identical, twins. *Blue Van Gogh Cypress* has a breezy surf vibe: green turquoise, warm sky blue, and cool aqua, whereas *Blue Pink Van Gogh Cypress* relies compositionally on more keyed out, emphatic curls: jazzy, punctual navy blue notes. The Italian Masks have two long Pinocchio noses, but vary widely from there. The French Masks are loose homages to

Monet and other Impressionist painters, who Grotjahn has long admired for their painterly skills and approaches. Sometimes, the French Mask surfaces such as *Untitled (The Skies Remembered II, French Mask M31e)*, resemble Monet-esque soft sunrises and blurred pastel gardens, or John Currin's voluptuous portraits of women. But some of the French Masks, like *Untitled (Lettered and Named Blue, French Mask M31h)*, don't look French at all. With its jarring juxtapositions of royal blue, red-orange, cadmium red, chocolate brown, and black, and with the artist's witchy signature tattooed backwards across the mask's face, Grotjahn likens this piece to "Abstract Expressionism, filtered through a certain kind of German, like Kippenberger. What hopefully comes out is a freedom of unfinishedness." By locating constraints within forms, motifs, and compositions, then, the goal is to work the form out as quickly as possible, in order to make the freest paintings which entails getting lost in the paint.

Grotjahn's embedded traces of process are architectural; the painted sculptures showcase this architecture particularly since these are remnant cardboard boxes with incorporated paper roll casts, source materials that conjure protection through packing, wrapping, and covering. The paint blobs, smears, and scrapes waffled and encrusted onto their surfaces like barnacles on the bottom of a wizened ship are meticulously applied, though the paint's application is much freer than his previous paintings and drawings which tend to be made one at a time, with an exacting, more premeditated planning (especially the *Butterflies*). These are often made in suites, up to three at once, in part to depressurize the idea of a successful outcome, as well as to welcome more messiness and uncertainty into the work. The artist even uses the drier leftover paint from the paintings on canvas to alter color choices in his decision-making equation?, again to welcome unlikely solutions into his visual challenges. These kinds of exercises depressurize the myth of perfection, and allow space for experimentation.

As a result of this cultivated precariousness, these painted sculptures are physically and psychologically very challenging to make. Grotjahn says that the systemic certainty of making the *Butterfly* series allowed him more mental peace, whereas this new work presents total unpredictability as the primary provocation. Increasingly, Grotjahn steers directly into aleatory process and aesthetic unfinishedness because implicit to inevitable failures are potentially greater joys in meditative discovery. In this way, Grotjahn likens painting to "sports, like basketball. Each game varies, but there are parameters. There's a glory in that, right? Michael Jordan said that when he got into the zone, he saw himself as a praying mantis with a teeny ball and a huge hoop. It's possible to be so in the zone that there's no room for anything else. Which I love."⁸

The destruction of dichotomies mentioned in the beginning is essential to bear in mind when viewing Grotjahn's artworks, because paradoxically, Grotjahn's freedom of initiative in these new painted sculptures—which are at once the most figurative,

representational, and abstract to date; as well as the most conceptual and formal — recharges and redirects the question of figuration in myriad new (and simultaneously ancient) directions. These sculptures are riddled with enticing contradictions. On one hand, when sharing space with these sculptures, cast in bronze and bolted to pedestals, the viewer enters a colorful, foreboding, heavy metal graveyard: a champion lair of headhunting trophies. On the other hand, I wouldn't be surprised if a sculpture like *Untitled (African, Gated Front and Back Mask M34.f)* started walking-twitching her imperfect nose to ignite olfactory senses, then creaking into movement, like the newly oiled Tin Man in *Wizard of Oz*. That said, caricature is not Grotjahn's intention: he uses humanizing devices to develop formal motifs, systems, and composition tools in his work, in order to emancipate and encourage himself to renouncing pre-conceived notions of virtuosity. This act of relinquishing control has increasingly become a hallmark definition of quality in Grotjahn's oeuvre.

The sculptures' uncanny qualities, like Frankenstein's monster, recall expanded notions of pre-19th century (pre-photographic) portraiture and ritualistic masking, which as genres have always been yoked to invented *dramatis personae*. Portraiture before the advent of photography sought to locate universalism in particularity through symbolism, idealism, and evocations of time-lessness, while masking often created complex characterization through opposition. Both mediums, whether ritualized or commodified, aimed towards dilating expressions of "lost beauty" (and, in turn, monstrosity as in the case of satire). As David Levi Strauss points out, portraiture's potential to contemplate lost beauty is immense, yet is seemingly forgotten in most contemporary depictions:

In the modern period, and especially in photography, portraiture has concentrated more on the physical traits of subjects in an attempt to reveal social typologies and assert identity, and also to explore the evolution of physical, psychological, and social types through the conventions of representation. The older sense of portraying moral or spiritual ideals, in the direct contemplation of the "lost beauty of mankind," has been mostly eclipsed in recent times.®

Viewed in light of portraiture as an art form that can potentially depict generalized ideals rather than lionizing individual personality, would it be too much a stretch to consider Grotjahn's abstract sculptures as a new form of idealized, imagined portraiture—a return to its fantastic, expanded form? Perhaps not. Especially if the viewer bears in mind that personification (arguably the goal of portraiture) is not relegated to realism in individualized caricature. When comparing masks used for ritualistic purposes with those used purely for secular entertainment, anthropologist

A. David Napier says that: Personificatory thought is inseparable from the fact of experience, and transforming role of masks is developmentally most dramatic in their association with the greatest paradoxes all—that is, with creation and destruction, birth

and death. In these most moving and difficult of all transitions, the use of masks illustrates the continued attempt to confront paradox by recourse to personification, to state that mutability is a precondition of personality rather than an aberration.¹⁰ Mutability as a precondition in these works is requisite-perhaps relative to why Mark

Grotjahn has for the past six years expanded his painting practice onto sculpture, to access new surfaces that handle natural light differently, natural light as medium being integral to Grotjahn's practice. He's probing painting's mutability and is renowned for pushing his primary material—paint—into new corners. Interestingly, in considering where he'll go next, the artist is removing paint from the sculpture equation entirely towards an exposure of raw bronze casts. Sharp bronze seams, remnants of sprue bars, and plaster bits left wedged into corners showing how the molds were shaped remain intact, giving the new sculptures crude effect. Yet even if Grotjahn increasingly seeks "unfinishedness" as he calls it, his eternal search for revitalization, invigoration, and attendant consciousness is guaranteed in the metamorphosis.

Kelley, Mike. "From the Sublime to the Uncanny: Mike Kelley in Conversation with Thomas McEvilley," in *Foul Perfection*, MIT Press, 2003, p. 61.

1 Nickas, Bob. *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, Phaidon, 2009, p. 5.

2 Los Angeles studio, October 22, 2016.

3 Kundera, Milan. "The Consciousness of Continuity," in *The Curtain*, Harper Perennial, 2005, p. 12.

4 Kundera, Milan. "The Consciousness of Continuity," in *The Curtain*, Harper Perennial, 2005, p. 15.

5 Hoptman, Laura. "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," in *Forever Now*, MoMA, 2015. This group exhibition included Grotjahn.

6 Or as he says, "it takes me out of making paints to get a certain kind of color."

7 All quotes from studio visit, October 22, 2016.

1 Strauss, David Levi. "The Democracy of Universal Vulnerability: On Robert Bergman's Portraits," in *Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow*, Aperture, 2014, p. 69.

Napier, A. David. *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*, UC Press, 1986, p. 18.

The trapeze artist

By Caroline Kading

"Circus Circus" is the first institutional solo exhibition of Mark Grotjahn in Germany. An astonishingly late date in the career of the American artist, whose work has gained increasing recognition since the beginning of this century in the US, where he is today considered to be among the most important painters. The fact that it is only in 2014 that a solo exhibition is being dedicated to Grotjahn in Germany points to the differences between the cultural authorities in the field of contemporary art. Curators, museums as well as galleries shape meaning and values, and according to their continental context they bring different degrees of attention to individual artists, in apparent disregard of the much-mooted globalization of culture. The almost exclusively American attention, which Mark Grotjahn's work has received, is also a sign of the fact that the content of his painting is deeply rooted in an American art tradition.

The work of Grotjahn, who was born in Pasadena in 1968, has developed against the background of the post-1950 art of the West Coast, where he lives in Los Angeles, its cultural centre. In comparison with the art of the East Coast, centered on New York, West Coast art has often been overshadowed. To differentiate the two directions, New York painting tends to be object-oriented, conceptual and analytical and to convey its artistic content in a purposeful, functional and effective manner. The painting from Los Angeles and its surrounding area, on

the other hand, is inclined to surrealism and symbolism and is marked by irony, absurdity and theatricality.

Since the beginning of the new mil-lennium, Grotjahn's paintings may be divided into two series: the "Butterfly" and the "Face" series. The formalistic and hard-edged "Butterfly" paintings reference with their schematic pictorial language to US late modernist painting and especially its geometrical aspects, which were developed by Barnett Newman, Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. This tendency has been gradually assimilated by post-modernist relativism. In the 1980s, Peter Halley formed his conceptual symbolism in the language of geometric abstraction.

More recently, Wade Guyton has continued this formalist approach with his ink-jet printing on canvas. This is a tradition which assigns a subordinate role to the physical trace of the artist.

This physical trace is still visible in the

"Butterfly" paintings, but it is greatly reduced by the formalistic composition.

Radiating outward along both sides

of a vertical, middle stripe are hard-edged sequences of color which fan out to the edges of the painting. They are either (almost) monochrome or composed of bright colors, and the direction of the "rays" is emphasized from their tip to the edges of the picture by continuous brushstrokes. Curved lines or gradations of color within a single area are dispensed with. The composition and execution of the work seems inorganic, but a relationship to nature is established by the titles as *Untitled (Blue Butterfly Light to Dark VIII)*, 2006. In this way the paintings are given a figurative dimension, in as much as their titles play on the idea of the outspread wings of a butterfly viewed from above. The somewhat glossy, evenly handled surfaces of the pictures have something of the characteristics of the light-reflecting wings of a butterfly and have a similar shimmering, iridescent quality. Hence the formalistic "Butterfly" paintings are also ironical representations.

Ironical because the perspectival perception of the viewer is disturbed by the two slightly diverging vanishing points on either side of the middle stripe. A psychedelic dimension cannot be denied —what could be more psychedelic than the dream of a butterfly spreading out its asymmetrical wings?

Grotjahn began to work on the "Butterfly" series, which he brought to a provisional close in 2008, concurrently with the "Face" series. In contrast to the "Butterflies", the "Faces" emphasize the act of painting as such, and the gestural application of paint. In this respect, they reference the gesture of Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Frany Kline or Willem de Kooning, whose work processes come to light in the Form of traces left upon the pictorial surface. In the "Face" paintings, primary facial features such as eyes, nose and mouth always constitute the framework around which painting evolves. These figural elements emerge intact out of the emphatic materiality of the streams of paint.

The paintings in the exhibition "Circus Circus" at Kunstverein Freiburg in May 2014, for the first time merge the distinct approaches Grotjahn has brought to the "Butterfly" and the "Face" pictures. The seven "Circus" works on display are a selection from what is currently a total of fifteen works which he has produced since 2012 for the occasion of the exhibition. The word "face" occurring in the titles of all the works makes it clear that they belong to the "Face" series. On display in an adjoining room is a new sculpture made of bronze and covered with oil paint. This single example from Mark Grotjahn's "Mask" series pursues an analogous method in which the painting process is organized around fixed facial features. The difference, however, lies in the three-dimensionality of the holes for eyes and mouth in the bronze, as well as in the rod for the nose. These characteristics puncture the materiality of the paint, whereas the facial features which

are sketched at the beginning of each painting from the new "Circus" series are of a common illusionistic order and absorbed by the process of painting.

The exhibition title "Circus Circus" sounds playful at first, even somewhat childlike, but it points toward complex references to European modernism as well as to postmodern US culture.

The first reference is to the painting *Cirque*, 1890/91 by Georges Seurat, a late Impressionist French painter; Grotjahn has stated that this work serves as a point of departure for the new series.

Seurat, whose early works such as *Une Baignade, Asnières*, 1884 were based on direct observation, created with *Cirque* a work, which seems instead to have arisen out of the imagination.

The second reference is to the Hotel Circus Circus in Las Vegas, which with its three casinos is one of the largest of the establishments there; Grotjahn is familiar with it from personal visits.

As an entertainment and gambling me-tropolis, Las Vegas is an artificial oasis set amid the vast desert of Nevada, and

may be seen as the essence of postmodernism, embodying a fantasy world. In several parts of the city, the casinos, amusement centers or luxury hotels are styled as copies of buildings in distant locations, such as the Egyptian pyramids or the Eiffel Tower. Thus a historically or geographically remote reality becomes a sign of itself. Consider that one fundamental aspect of modernism consisted of valuing truth over fiction. As different as are the times to which these two references point, and as wide the distance separating their high culture and pop culture sources, nonetheless in some respects there are correspondences:

Seurat's picture is an imaginary, fantastical spectacle, a representation which could be seen through the lens of magical realism.

The third reference alludes to capitalist commercial culture. In the casinos of Las Vegas, everything revolves around money. Even though there is the hope of winning, most of the time more money is lost than gained. In a figurative sense, however, the visitors lose themselves in the mirror lined gaming rooms. For the posters and the invitation to the exhibition in Freiburg, Grotjahn selected a color photograph of a neon sign with a height of thirty-two feet in the form of a clown figure.

It is the logo of a liquor store in Hollywood named Circus Liquor. this advertising image, reminiscent of the graphic depictions of the US Pop Art of the late- 1950s, points toward the theme of consumerculture to which Grotjahn has already turned his attention in the

mid-1990s, when he offered store owners copies he had made of their store signs in exchange for the originals.

Just as a complex of references to various cultural phenomena are combined in the exhibition title, so different painterly approaches are combined in the "Circus" paintings. By extending and reflecting upon the idioms of the earlier "Face" and "Butterfly" series in the new, large formats, Grotjahn incurs a risk that should not be under-estimated. The geometrical severity of the "Butterflies" in conjunction with the elemental painting process of the "Faces" could lead to their mutual neutralization. Furthermore, the rigor of the "Butterfly" pictures or the rawness of the "Face" pictures could be diminished.

But with these high stakes, Grotjahn has placed his bet and won, for in their interplay the opposing values imbue the paintings with a new dynamism. Standing directly in front of the large "Circus" paintings, the interlaced stripes of color appear to emanate from the central axis toward the edges of the pictures and set themselves apart from each other. It seems as if the colored stripes of the "Butterfly" paintings have become autonomous, so vigorous is the movement with which they wind towards the viewer. Curving stripes of various lengths are arranged in thin, parallel bands which suggest a gestural, almost graphic application of paint, although a palette-knife

has been used to apply the oil paint to the cardboard mounted on canvas.

If the blatantly dynamic painting process summons up an association to the

"Face"

paintings, the "Circus" series takes from Seurat's painting the lively instability, which is characteristic of its pictorial world. In comparison, the earlier "Faces" seem still and iconic.

In Grotjahn's "Circus" series, the swirling movement corresponds to Seurat's dynamism, which conveys

the impression that the pictorial elements in the circus ring are in free fall.

The acrobats and the horse seem to be in flight. The hair of the rear-view figure at the lower edge of the picture stands on end, and in her right hand she holds a yellow band which flutters into the depths of the pictorial space.

The events are transformed into an enthralling dynamism which liberates them from gravity. The protagonists in their costumes have a surrealistic look,

Georges Seurat, Cirque, 1890/91

Oil auf Leinwand/Oil on canvas 185 x 152 cm/72⁷/₈ × 59⁷/₈ inches

in stark contrast to the static, almost geometrically arranged background with its fixed rows of seats and uniform

onlookers. The coloration of the painting also conforms to an internal logic, in which the bodies of the horses, the skin color of the figure seen from behind, and the architectural boundaries of the circus ring are all in white. These pictorial elements in spite of the turbulent current which animates the composition seem paradoxically to be artificial and lifeless.

There is a similar transformation through which signs in the

"Circus" series relinquish their function. Although it remains possible to recognize the almond-shaped forms, the elongated ovals and the double squiggles as signs for eyes, mouth and nostrils, the final forms are more multi-dimensional than in the earlier "Face" paintings. For example, they can also be taken as the natural forms of a forest: large palm fronds, or leafy branches. Something that originally functioned as a sign has been translated into pure painting. Like a trapeze artist, Grotjahn's pictorial language pivots between the abstract painting process and figurative signs, and creates in spite of the materially emphasized surfaces, which generally convey an impression of flatness deep pictorial spaces in which the entire surface is suffused with vibrancy. The paint is so densely applied that it gathers along the edges of the paintings. Out of this material surface at one moment it seems an image of dense vegetation emerges, at another the features of one or more faces. In Grotjahn's "Circus" series, various references and pictorial dimensions are brought into equilibrium. The large-format paintings are the most theatrical and performative works in his oeuvre. In earlier "Face" works, facial features always remained as anchors in the painting process and the faces could clearly be recognized as such. In the "Circus" series, these physiognomies seem to have been so vigorously worked upon by the painterly flow that the faces no longer come to the fore. This has the consequence that the paintings are no longer a fixed image of something. In other words, in spite of the artificiality and weightlessness of its pictorial world, Seurat's Cirque remains a frozen moment, whereas in a "Circus" painting by Grotjahn there are no such fixed points. Instead the eye of the viewer cannot come to a standstill. Similarly, the "Circus" series swings between pictoriality and process, materiality and signification, and between a modernist past and a postmodernist present.

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The Divided Self

Mark Grotjahn's "Circus" series

By Mark Prince

In his book about T. S. Eliot, *Words Alone*, Denis Donoghue addresses the ambiguity of the "voice" or "point of view" of Eliot's early poems—the question of "who is speaking this poem?"—by referring to surrealist and symbolist painting, and what Marshall McLuhan called

"juxtaposition without copula": the establishing on a single canvas of

"two or more points of force". A canvas is interpreted as "a field of force without official syntax, a closed system resistant to translation"!

The conventional view of a single subjectivity behind lyric poetic utterance proves inadequate to a poem such as *The Waste Land*, which Eliot gave the prototype title of "He Do the Police in Different Voices".

What is required is a model of interchangeable, unstable subjectivity, of "subject and object melting into each other"?

Contemporaneous criticism of late-modernist US painting of the 1950s and 60s made much of its unprecedented directness as a vehicle for subjectivity. Finding his artistic "voice", a painter left a trace that was less a contingent, indexical link back to the catalyst of the hand from which the finished work is essentially independent, than a personal testimony, a signature, a direct line to the artist's subjectivity.

The foregoing of representation—the objective correlative of a figurative painting—might allow painting to forge a connection, untrammelled by extraneous narratives, between artist and viewer.

US modernist art of the late 1950s and early 60s, from Abstract Expressionism to post-painterly abstraction, is an essential point of reference for Mark Grotjahn's paintings and sculptures, but his approach to how subjectivity is invested in a painting has more congruence with that of the literary modernist Eliot. He possesses the "historical sense", which Eliot considered indispensable to an artist in his maturity: a consciousness of the

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past's multiplicity, of the spectrum of historical voices that speak through any contemporary voice. This is something other than the means for an artist to bolster his authority with the reassuring sanction of history, in the manner of so much art-allusive, and particularly modernist art-allusive, postmodernist art of recent years. Allusion, for Grotjahn, is as much a subversion of the habitual stability of art-historical values as an homage to previous stations within the traditions to which he belongs.

Mark Pr

Grotjahn's transition from the

"Three-Tiered Perspective"

paintings

of the late 1990s to the first "Butterfly" paintings of the early 2000s convert-

ed the divisive horizon line of a landscape image-

-divisive because

each painting broke into three, separate perspectival vignettes-into a Barnett Newman-esque "zip" separating two bursts of segmented color. Emanating from its own focal point on the left and right edge of this central stripe, each fanning-out of color contradicted the other's claim to dictate the painting's illusionism. The shift to a vertical format implied the substitution of a landscape for a figural metaphor.

Newman's "zips" may be understood as metaphors for a standing self, autonomous, isolated in the space which articulates them. For Grotjahn, the vanishing point had become the vanishing self. But as the doubling of the vanishing point fractures the pictorial field into two

"points of force", it also introduces the impression of two viewpoints looking back at us, like misaligned eyes in a face. What a painting's metaphor for perspective loses through its bifurcation, its metaphor for subjectivity gains by assuming the appearance of a face's double source of vision. There is a sophisticated irony at work in converting the means by which we "look in" to a painting into the image of its looking back at us, and having the breakdown of perspective double

8 Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 103-104.

9 Ibid., p. 124.

T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, UK: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 22. as a splintering of self. The deconstruction of Newman's metaphysical idealism is ironic but never merely reductively. Grotjahn's double spectra of radiating, acute angled color fields separate

out a painting's autonomous "voice" into voices, while associating pictorial illusionism with enlightenment and potentiality. These color fields, creating the illusion of projected color, are metaphors for what Coleridge, in his notebooks, called the "agency" of form, as distinct from the stasis of shape. They reach out to us, offering entry into a painting. They are the "agency" of the paintings' static, vertical axis. But this axis remains a flat stripe, a barrier obscuring radiating light, its potential as a metaphor for selfhood atomized into peripheral addenda: the artist's initials rendered as block-capital design elements in corners of the painting. Grotjahn creates the illusion of a reflexive vision, of the painting's return of its viewer's gaze, but the "point of view" he grants to the painting is fragmented, objectified, divided, alienated.

The sculptures and paintings based on an image of the human face, which Grotjahn began in the early 2000s, made the incipient gaze of the "Butterfly" paintings explicit. Sculptures involved glueing an inner tube of a toilet roll, representing a nose, to a cardboard packing box, scoring eye and mouth shapes around it, then applying oil paint to flesh out the rudimentary image's armature. Since 2009, Grotjahn has cast these objects in bronze, then painted onto the metal with its ready-made facial composition. Initially, he considered these works as a "personal," "private" activity, and did not exhibit or sell them. They allowed a looser process to complement the meticulous labor required by the

"Butterfly" paintings. This complementarity became structural when he gave the paintings and sculptures the formal titles of "Faces" (paintings) and "Masks" (sculptures),

and exhibited them in

conjunction with the "Butterflies", cultivating a distinction between formal divergence and thematic continuity.

Whereas the "Butterflies" schematize a metaphor for the subjectivity inherent in the modernist art work, the "Faces" and "Masks" present the self conveyed by a painting as a fiction, a screen of primal signs through which the artist communicates, even as he uses that screen to protect his "privacy". Appositely, Grotjahn recalls that as a child he would "make masks out of paper ...

We called these fire masks to protect us from the fire and the fireplace". Both the "Butterfly" and "Face" series make

us conscious of how we seek confirmation of ourselves in a work of art, and how US modernist painting's large-scale verticality and overt traces of gesture elicited and responded to that desire. But Grotjahn is always intimating that such a response may be untrustworthy, and that subjectivity, if it exists, lies elsewhere: beyond the mask of signs that constitute the legibility of a painting's image.

The working principle of complementarity conformed to the bifurcation of form and signification that has characterized many significant painting practices since the 1960s—from Gerhard Richter's gestural abstractions and paintings from photographs, to Günther Förg's materialistic, abstract painting and large-scale architectural photography, to Christopher Wool's decorative silkscreens and text paintings. Grotjahn was treating his modernist models, and their categorical imperatives, with the tools of an ironic postmodern relativism. He challenged the modernist art work's characteristic aura of contained subjectivity on two fronts. The "Butterfly" paintings reach back to Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian via Barnett Newman,

4 Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection, ed. Seamus Perry, Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2002, p. 124.

5 Mark Grotjahn interviewed by Ana Vejzovic Sharp, Los Angeles, 2012. Frank Stella, and Kenneth Noland, a tradition in which strict, formal organization was pitched as a corollary to human autonomy, dignity, morality, and latterly to the streamlining of humanity by post-industrial society. Contained therefore, has the positive connotation of a vehicle for subjectivity as well as the negative one of its constraint.

The "Face" series exposes the paint's gestural application in long, nubbly brushstrokes, forming streams that converge into facial signs: the two, wide slits of eyes; the twin orifices of nostrils; an oblong or ellipse that might be a mouth. The unpredictability with which these signs emerge from thickets of impasto resists the automatic legibility of a facial image. In *Untitled (Red Over Black Face Diagonal Cut 775)*, 2008, for example, irised pupils appear to have sprung loose of their eyes and multiplied across the canvas. Although their facial motifs recall primitive art, the "Face" paintings are subject to the internalized formal coherence of high modernist painting, but the aspect of it in which empirical representation was radically transformed into overtly artificial configurations: the Picasso of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, 1907, the Willem de Kooning of *Woman I*, 1950-1952, and the late, cartoon-figurative Philip Guston. Through artifice, signs relinquish their links to the facial features, which catalyzed them.

Finding the attempt to forge an empathetic connection between himself and a "Face" painting frustrated, a viewer defaults to the alternative but associated subjectivity embodied by the painting's exposed facture in its function as a causal trace.

But this default is similarly frustrated because Grotjahn's

process is as

self-effacing as it is pronounced. The impersonal, repetitive accretion of paint asserts materiality over expression, and substitutes objecthood and production for subjectivity.

For the modernist critic Michael Fried, a painting must "defeat or suspend its own objecthood" by converting material objects into pictorial shape, in order to prevent pictoriality from degrading into minimalist literalism. But if pictoriality, whether abstract or figurative, creates a space to enable the modernist painting's conveyance of a metaphor for subjectivity, Grotjahn paradoxically uses the essential devices of painterly pictoriality—the deep, perspective illusionism of the landscape genre, and the facial signifiers of portraiture—to subvert that metaphor.

Grotjahn's new series of "Circus" paintings, 2012 - 14, there are currently fifteen, of which seven were first

exhibited at Kunstverein Freiburg in Germany in May 2014—declare, in their titles, their place within the "Face" series. However, unlike earlier "Face" works, they reduce facial signifiers to catalysts for a process, which overwrites their cues, as their multicolored palette attenuates the tonal contrasts on which the legibility of image and sign depend. The vertical, 2.5 m-high format of the series pitches a familiar US-modernist scale, while the works are structured around a defined vertical axis which recalls the central Newman-esque "zip" of the "Butterflies"; but from this vertical "spine", intricately striated bands of color arc, like organic versions of the "wings" of converging perspective in a "Butterfly" painting. Eye shapes are indistinguishable from lush leaves, mouths from the elongated petals of some exotic flower. The heavily-impastoed surfaces are composed of miniature stabs of a palette knife which fracture the flourish of the artist's gesture, as the forms into which they combine shatter the "gaze" the painting might evoke if its facial signs were more legible. The "voice" of gesture is as unlocatable as the "point of view" of image.

Since his early, performative projects, Grotjahn has invested his work with a consciousness of its simultaneous status as commodity and art. In the mid 1990s, he painted a T-shirt and offered to exchange his copy merely for a work of art, had an only partial functionality for the mercenary original; or unstacked a supermarket's shelves photo of anyone the goods laid out in an aisle, and then replaced them before anyone noticed. Such actions conceive the artwork as both its integral self and a calibrated mechanism that gauges how it will be rendered as sign of its own value by the market that traffics it. By means of such self-reflexivity it attempts to preempt its manipulation. The monochromy of many later "Butterfly" paintings, such as Untitled (Green Butterfly M. Grotjahn 03), 2003, 15 only interrupted by the artist's signature and the year of the painting's execution, painted in a contrasting color to the rest of the work, as though mooting the point that the painting's delicate, tonal complexities are only a screen for the naming of a painting as a token of its value, a confirmation of the artist's name as a market identity. The conceit was explored by Robert Rauschenberg in the late 1950s—in paintings such as Untitled, 1958—in which the artist's name and the work's

date are such dominant features in an otherwise abstract composition that the painting's formal elements register as foils for the printed information. There is potential irony in this foiling, given that the painting's primary idiom rejects the signification of a signature, and as well the proclamation of authorship characteristic of the kind of Abstract Expressionist painting, which Ryman was intent on superseding. But, in Grotjahn's work, irony is always indistinguishable from innocence: his painted initials retain the overtones of a child's claiming of a drawing as a confirmation of nascent individuality. Inasmuch as they are formalized cyphers representing an artist's identity, the capitalized signatures suggest both commercial logos and formalist abstraction, a paradoxical conjunction. They assert a meaning they are simultaneously denying.

The "Circus" paintings extend this dialectic between subjectivity and value.

With their

spectacular,

over-figure-

high scales, vibrant chromaticism and swirling illusionism, they double as irreducible specificity and modernist archetype, which, from a postmodern vantage point, is inevitably also a sign of the modernist art work's value.

Many of the paintings feature hand-scrawled signatures and dates that might be parodies of the modernist artist's self-vaunting and -branding. The modernist allusions have become vo-

racious and expansive: from Jackson Pollock's 1950s drip paintings, all the way back to the encrusted, chromatic brilliance of a Monet garden painting, or the pointillism of the late Seurat painting, *Cirque*, 1890/91, from which the series takes its title. Grotjahn pitches an ironic generalization of the modernist art work's aura to underline his critique of modernist painting's claim to provide a vehicle for the expression of a coherent self.

Whereas the twin focal points of a "Butterfly" painting relativize its pictorial field, and with it the subjectivity a unified pictoriality implies, the "Circus" paintings atomize both picture and subject.

The facial symbols- which the context of the "Face" series leads us to expect are everywhere and nowhere. Subject and object melt into each other, the human self into the otherness of the unhuman nature of leaves, branching boughs, dense undergrowth; or, in contrast with the organic implications of both, into the inorganic materiality of pigment. The "T" of an eye doubles as the contour of a leaf, or merely as an arc of stippled oil paint. If *Untitled (Circus No. 6 Face 44.22)*, 2013, is scrutinized with the intention of discovering in it a facial image, and with it a gaze to meet our own, every possible cue

proliferates into others, as every sign equivocates between a range of potential referents.

Whereas signification forms the substratum of language over which the process of the "Face" paintings congeals, signs in the "Circus" series are always ambivalent, not merely in what they signify, but in whether the paintings comprehend signification as a viable trope or support it as a facet of their idiom. We search in vain for a facial image only to find each pictorial configuration slipping into another in an endless array of potential selves, all effacing themselves by ceding to their counterparts. The series can be construed as a dressing-down of the unified pictorial plane, which allows a necessary degree of pictorial continuity to support an image (and a self). Static forms dissolve into a dynamic motion like that of Jackson Pollock's paint-skein arabesques, substituting the motion of dropped paint for the stability of pictured form.

Grotjahn's dissolution of signs for subjectivity recalls the work of another L.A. artist, Mike Kelley, and his 1990s installations of stuffed toys. In *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991, mass-produced toy animals were taxonomically arranged on a series of tables, emphasizing traits of manufacture which would subvert a viewer's inclination to perceive them anthropomorphically. A formalist interpretation frustrates a viewer's reflexive empathy, the tendency—in Kelley's words—to

"project into the toys and see them as living things", their "object nature ... repressed" along with the broader social context of exploitative sweatshop labor which can be inferred from an objective reading.[®] The toys are disillusioned through proximity to others to which their design language corresponds. The conceit is one of "returning knowledge to form", to adopt Michael Wood's phrase? As the one submits its individuality to the many, subject succumbs to, or becomes indistinguishable from, object. And yet, the effect of debunking the illusion of an object's autonomous subjectivity is not to sever form from meaning but to jolt them out of congruence. A functional mechanism, designed to impart meaning—the trite effect of embodied subjectivity—becomes objective rather than denotative. No effect is allowed to escape from material into meaning.

Signs formulated to impart selfhood become mysterious, disattached to a subject, and what was a familiar, anthropomorphic object becomes a talismanic one.

In Grotjahn's paintings, there is a similar transformation of functional signs into talismanic painterly configurations. In the "Butterfly" series, systematic perspectival recession,

implying the coherence of a unified pictorial field, is rendered as a talismanic image: the fanning of a butterfly's wings. An arbitrary image of a butterfly is conferred onto the paintings by their title. The sign of this organic image remains at a tangent to the

inorganic geometric cyphers of pictorial depth out of which it is composed. A formalistic composition has been coerced into masquerading as the unified pictorial field of representation. In the "Face" series, facial signs function as a structural armature for a painting process which renders them partially dysfunctional. Dissociated from their representational function they gain a mysterious, talismanic aura.

Reviewing James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923, T.S. Eliot distinguished between a "narrative method" —in which a fictional character is given its own coherent space within a coherent imaginative backdrop—

—and

a "mythical method" in which such continuities unravel in the face of immediate, unpredictable experience.¹⁰ In the "Circus" series, the facial signifiers of the "Face" paintings have renounced their "narra-tive" function to the immediacy of streams of multicolored pigment.

10 Speaking of Art, ed. William Furlong, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2010, p. 133.

11 Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 114.

Donoghue, p. 124. The role of these colored streams, crafted out of infinitesimal stabs of Grotiahn's palette knife, is paradoxical. They are the dysfunctional copulae within compositions whose logic is to erode the narrative connectivity between juxtaposed painterly events. They intimate structural links between elements, which remain dislocated, a syntax they are in the process of dissolving, an expression of unified subjectivity they are designed to refute.